

Communication Matters

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Workplace Assessment for People with Hearing Loss

- Julie Eckhardt



A seasoned nurse is scared to death of losing her job. Increasingly, she struggles to communicate with patients. Though she has been wearing hearing aids for years, she is feeling more exhausted from straining to hear and is afraid of making a critical mistake.

A middle-aged man has recently started a new job. Though he has been successfully living with hearing loss for years, this new job is taxing. After training, he will be expected to work at the customer service desk one day a week. He dreads communicating with strangers, especially people with unfamiliar accents.

An executive has a stable, but severe hearing loss. He has learned to compensate very well, and most of his co-workers do not even realize he has a hearing loss. But recently he is stressed because of an increasing reliance on new communication technology. He is expected to be available by cell phone, but cannot hear unless he is in a very quiet location. Staff training is now accomplished by web seminars that are not captioned. Weekly phone conferences, using a speakerphone, are a huge challenge. He is very concerned he will miss some important information.

Who benefits from a workplace assessment?

The above are typical examples of people who can benefit from a workplace assessment. The assessment is most beneficial to people with a moderate to severe hearing loss, or even a profound loss. They may have been successfully working for years, but increasingly experience the strain and uncertainty of a progressive hearing loss, or a change in work environment. A workplace assessment may also be appropriate for someone with a mild to moderate hearing loss, who is making mistakes on the job and is unsure why (some people think they hear more than they actually do.)

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Support for Serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing Customers

Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) has contracted with Julie Eckhardt to provide technical assistance and training regarding



services and employment for people who are deaf, hard of hearing or late deafened.

Services to MRS employees, customers, and community partners include:

- Technical assistance
- Workplace assessments
- Workshops on hearing loss
- Employer services
- Information and referral
- Research accommodations

If you have a question related to serving individuals with hearing loss, contact Julie Eckhardt at:

231/922-2943 or
jewel@chartermi.net

Information or news related to Deaf or Hard of Hearing services may be forwarded to Julie Eckhardt at jewel@chartermi.net. Views expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily the views of Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth-Rehabilitation Services. Communication Matters is available on the web at www.michigan.gov/mrs and on the E-Learn Deaf & Hard of Hearing Resource Center.

Workplace Assessment for People with Hearing Loss

Employers and co-workers benefit also! When a person on the team communicates more effectively, everyone's job becomes easier.

What about recently diagnosed hearing loss?

For someone new to hearing aids, the first step is appropriate fitting of aids and a period of adjustment. Once the hearing aids are properly programmed, there may be no further needs at this time. People with a mild to moderate hearing loss may find that hearing aids resolve most of their hearing difficulties. Problems may still crop up in noisy situations, group meetings, and with telecommunication devices. If so, a workplace assessment may be helpful.

**Most people
are grateful
for assistance with
managing hearing
loss on the job.**

What is a workplace assessment for people with hearing loss?

A workplace assessment will tease out the on-the-job

listening situations that create difficulty for workers. Hearing loss varies as much as jobs and worksites. Therefore, a workplace assessment must carefully consider the individual's hearing loss, compensation strategies, hearing aids used, and the particularities of the job.

A workplace assessment can be accomplished by having the worker complete the "Workplace Assessment for Individuals with Hearing Loss" (Located with policy "4150 Hearing Impairments" on the **E-Learn Rehabilitation Services Manual**). Or consult with an experienced evaluator (resources are at the end of this article).

It may not be necessary for the evaluator to visit the worksite. Often, enough information can be gathered by interviewing the worker in a detailed and systematic manner. Many workers shy away from calling attention to their hearing loss at work and prefer the assessment be conducted at another location.

What does the assessment provide?

The assessment will result in recommendations for accommodations after consideration of the most difficult listening situations, the worker's hearing aids and experience with hearing assistive technology, and factors in the work environment. Some accommodations will be low or no cost, and others will require the purchase and trial of assistive listening technology. Because there is wide variation in the way people function with hearing loss, it may be necessary to try several items before discovering the best match. Please remember that most manufacturers allow returns within 30 days. So, equipment should be tested at the work site as soon as feasible, and returned if it doesn't function as intended.

The **Hearing Assistive Technology Online Guide** is one tool that can be used to determine a range of possible accommodations. Find the guide on E-Learn at the **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Resource Center** or e-mail Julie Eckhardt (see below).

Cool Product! Clipboard Portable Loop

Doctors, nurses, real estate agents, engineers or anyone who works with people and needs a portable, discreet, and uncomplicated assistive listening device, may find the Clipboard Portable Loop to be very effective.



The clipboard has a microphone, and induction loop, which sends amplified sound directly to the t-coil in the user's hearing aids (hearing aids with t-coil are required). The clip board can be used indoors or out. It is ideal for one-on-one conversation within 3.5 feet. Will reduce the interference of background noise.

For more information:

<http://www.TecEar.com>
info@TecEar.com
248-867-2759

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Workplace Assessment

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How much time does it take?

The average workplace assessment requires 5 or 6 hours of the evaluator's time. More time is required if an employment site visit is needed. Time is spent interviewing the worker, researching possible accommodations, and writing a report with recommendations.

What do workers say?

The overwhelming response to the workplace assessment and recommendations is relief. People with hearing loss may struggle for years, assuming there is nothing more that can be done beyond hearing aids. For whatever reason, few hearing aid dispensers explain the use of hearing assistive technology, and consumers are usually unaware of possible accommodations that exist. Most people are grateful for assistance with managing hearing loss on the job.

T-Coils deserve special mention.

Most hearing assistive technology will function best if the user's hearing aids have a functioning t-coil. This tiny coiled magnet picks up magnetic waves from the assistive listening device, sending sound directly through the uniquely programmed hearing aid. Automatic t-coils do NOT work with assistive devices. Manual t-coils, activated by a switch or a remote control are much more versatile.

Resources for workplace assessments*

- Julie Eckhardt, on contract for MRS counselors and customers: 231/922-2943 or jewel@chartermi.net
- Nan Asher, Michigan Association for Deaf and Hard of Hearing: 800/YOUR EAR or nan@madhh.org
- Twyla Niedfeldt, Michigan Division on Deaf and Hard of Hearing: 877-499-6232 or niedfeldtt@michigan.gov
- Debra Self, Communication Access Center: 810-239-3112 or dsself@cacdhh.org

*The above list is not a recommendation either by inclusion or exclusion. These are state-wide service providers.

Grant Aims to Improve Employment Outcomes of Deaf Persons Who are Low-functioning or At-risk

The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education, has awarded a new Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project (DRRP) grant to the University of Arkansas Research & Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

The grant provides approximately \$1.3 million over three years. Research and demonstration studies will be aimed at improving employment outcomes for deaf persons who are low-functioning or otherwise at-risk. The project will include collaborative partnerships with a number of state vocational rehabilitation agencies, community-based rehabilitation programs and transition programs at state schools for the deaf and mainstream high schools.

The target population represents the most severely disabled segment of the more than 28 million persons in the U.S. with a hearing loss. This sub-group generally includes those individuals with functional limitations that necessitate intensive and longer-term education, rehabilitation and related services to enhance employment, independent living, and community participation.

The Center will conduct one national and five state/program level research and demonstration projects during the period 2007-2009. Some of the projects include:

- Development of a national profile on the "state of the art" regarding services to persons who are deaf and low-functioning or at-risk.
- Development of a psychometrically-validated tool that can be used to assess functional characteristics of the target population.
- Evaluation of the utility of available pre-employment preparation resources that can be used by service providers in working with the target population.
- Identification of best practices in job coaching to enhance workplace integration, job retention, and job advancement.

For more information, contact Dr. Douglas Watson, 501-686-9691 or dwatson@uark.edu.